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The Need for Speed - Maintaining the Information Advantage



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Introduction

In the first shoot down over American soil since World War II, the United States downed a People's Republic of China (PRC) high-altitude surveillance balloon over the coast of South Carolina in February 2023. Within 29 minutes of the F-22 fighter jet firing on the balloon, the United States Department of Defense issued a statement condemning the PRC, stating "President Biden and his national security team will always put the safety and security of the American people first while responding effectively to the PRC's unacceptable violation of our sovereignty."¹ Two months later, on April 6, 2023, leaked classified documents from the United States regarding Russia's invasion into Ukraine surfaced on Twitter. Within a week the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) arrested a Massachusetts Air National Guard Airman for uploading the intelligence; however, only after *The New York Times* conducted its own investigation and released his name and photos of the house in which he lived.

In both instances, the speed at which information traveled ensured the American public was aware of the actions of their military. In one situation, the Department of Defense communicated directly to the world to accuse the PRC of wrongdoing, and in the other, an independent press organization did the investigative work to ensure the leaked documents were not a Russian disinformation campaign. In the current information environment, the need for speed to gain and maintain the information advantage is more important than ever. The United States gains credibility by exposing adversarial actions and enforcing transparency with the American public, a commitment not all nations embrace.

¹ "Statement From Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III," Department of Defense, February 4, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3288535/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii/>.

The immediate dissemination of statements, imagery, and video helps the United States gain and maintain the information advantage, most notably to own the narrative in strategic competition. The United States' 2022 National Defense Strategy notes the importance of "acting urgently to build enduring advantages."² The information advantage is key to owning the information environment and to setting the narrative. Under the umbrella of strategic competition, with an eye on integrated deterrence, a thoughtful narrative can help to avoid unnecessary escalation and to aggressively call out the "PRC's coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences."³ The intelligence community and other critics of immediate declassification to inform Americans and influence adversaries believe that responding to one event sets the tone, demand, and pace for responding to all threats. Much like "strategic ambiguity" as a deterrence option, an unpredictable release of public information can help to achieve the same options.⁴

Further complicating the environment is the advent of social media, which now provides the advantage to the first party to respond, giving them the information advantage to own and set the narrative. The United States should prioritize the information instrument of national power, and the speed in which it releases information to shape the information environment to align with national security objectives. First, the information environment shapes decision and policymaking with the United States government's commitment to transparency providing facts amidst a media landscape rife with misinformation and disinformation. Second, prioritizing and

² Department of Defense. *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-national-defense-strategy-npr-mdr.pdf>.

³ Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 4.

⁴ Jared McKinney and Peter Harris, "Broken Nest: Deterring China from Invading Taiwan," *Parameters*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2021), 23.

employing information quickly enables the United States to own and shape the information environment, offering the United States more options and a decision-making advantage. Finally, the immediate declassification of imagery and video provides evidence when an adversary counters an initial attempt to set the narrative, offering the United States a robust information advantage to leverage against foes. Swift and timely dissemination of information helps the United States to gain and maintain the advantage more than it proves to be a liability. The United States cares about soft power and the image of the United States in dominating narratives that set a pro-United States narrative. This informational advantage needs leveraging domestically and globally in mobilizing resources to respond in a conflict or crisis.

Information Environment & Policy Making

The information environment shapes decision and policy making. Transparency from the United States government provides facts amidst a media landscape rife with misinformation and disinformation. The Biden Administration attempted to own the information environment when it first identified the February 2023 high-altitude surveillance balloon before the PRC could lie about its presence. The United States Department of Defense press releases said, “instances of this kind of balloon activity have been observed previously over the past several years” to demonstrate this was not the PRC’s first attempts to collect on the United States.⁵ In the brief statement provided by the Pentagon Press Secretary, Brigadier General Pat Ryder announced that the balloon was: 1) over the continental United States, 2) being tracked by the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), 3) not posing a physical threat by traveling well above

⁵ “DoD Statement on High-Altitude Surveillance Balloon,” Department of Defense, February 2, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3287173/dod-statement-on-high-altitude-surveillance-balloon>.

commercial air traffic, and 4) protected against collecting sensitive information.⁶ This statement allowed the United States government to be transparent and provide the facts ahead of any misinformation provided by the PRC.

Following the administration's press statements, the court of public opinion spoke loudly about the decision making to attack the high-altitude surveillance balloon. Some believed that not shooting down the high-altitude surveillance balloon would help deescalate tensions between the United States and the PRC, but others called on the Biden Administration to shoot it down. In an era of a congested information environment – newspapers, 24-hour cable news, internet news, and social media – opinions about whether to shoot down the balloon were varied and expressed through every information outlet. Media shaping policymaking is not a new phenomenon with the advent of the unlimited news cycle; public opinion heavily drives policy decisions. The advent of the constant news cycle collided with the Vietnam War. President Johnson felt the embedded press was constantly pumping war imagery and video into American living rooms.⁷ Forty years later, misinformation about weapons of mass destruction led to the United States' invasion into Iraq.

In an analogy for transparency, former Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, Louis Brandeis, called sunlight the best of disinfectants in a 1913 *Harper's Weekly* article demanding honesty from the banking industry.⁸ More importantly, he commended publicity as the “remedy for social and industrial diseases” when he condemned the trade's malfeasance. The same applies to government information. A meta-analysis of 56 empirical studies revealed that transparency

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Francis Bator, “No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 32, no. 3 (June 2008), 317.

⁸ Louis Brandeis, “What Publicity Can Do,” *Harper's Weekly*, December 20, 1913.

has a significant overall effect in reducing government corruption.⁹ While the United States prides itself on being transparent with its citizens, countries like the PRC and Russia do not engage in this practice. The PRC controls information through its major state media outlets, like *Xinhua*, which “have expanded while China tries to make them credible, palatable alternatives to existing global newswires based in liberal democracies.”¹⁰ In addition to utilizing its state media, Russia also places emphasis on expanding its laws and regulations to tighten control over internet infrastructure, online content, and the privacy of communications.¹¹

With both the PRC and Russia controlling information, they increase their ability to manufacture misinformation and disinformation. The United Nations teaches that “misinformation is false or inaccurate information, while disinformation is false information which deliberately misleads” in its guide to understanding how to use social media.¹² Both the PRC and Russia intentionally misstate facts.¹³ After the high-altitude surveillance balloon incident, the PRC foreign minister said it was of “civilian nature, used for scientific research such as meteorology.”¹⁴ Russia is no stranger to similar lies. The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab has tracked Russian hybrid warfare activities since 2015, and noted sowing doubt and fear is easier than changing minds, which is why the “Kremlin information operations focus so much on essentially generating chaos, causing contagion, causing a loss of

⁹ Can Chen and Sukumar Ganapati, “Is Transparency the Best Disinfectant?” *Open Government Partnership* (Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs), 2018, https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/OGP_Transparency-Best-Disinfectant_20180524.pdf.

¹⁰ Joshua Kurlantzick, “China’s Control of the ‘Pipes’ of Information and Its Implications for Global Internet Freedom,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 3, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-control-pipes-information-and-its-implications-global-internet-freedom>.

¹¹ “Russia: Growing Internet Isolation, Control, Censorship,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/18/russia-growing-internet-isolation-control-censorship>.

¹² United Nations, “Factsheet 4: Types of Misinformation and Disinformation,” *Using Social Media in Community Based Protection: A Guide*, January 2021.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Answered a Reporter’s Question on China’s Unmanned Airship Mistakenly Entering U.S. Airspace Due to Force Majeure,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, February 23, 2023.

morale, or just getting people simply confused about what's true and what's not."¹⁵ Knowing this is how the United States' adversaries operate, two things have become more important: 1) understanding the lies and ensuring they do not affect United States policy making, and 2) countering with factual information. When Russia and China focus on misinformation and disinformation, the United States must maneuver around both.

Shaping the Information Environment

To combat the rise of misinformation and disinformation, the United States needs to prioritize disseminating information quickly to enable it to own and shape the environment. Doing so will offer the United States more options and a decision-making advantage. By lagging on promulgating truthful information, the United States will give way to its adversaries and open the door for them to gain the advantage. A tactic that global human rights enforcers value is "naming and shaming" – a popular strategy to publicly say that a person or group has done something wrong.¹⁶ This creates a court of public opinion to shape the narrative, or to rally public opinion to counter a narrative already set in motion. Social media provides instantaneous community, with public opinion traveling faster than ever before. While the United States can be risk averse to how it labels adversary wrongdoing, this is a tactic the United States successfully employs in the Middle East to label Iran's malign behavior and decrease Iran's probing attacks on American forces in Syria.¹⁷

¹⁵ Vera Bergengruen, "Inside the Kremlin's Year of Ukraine Propaganda," *Time*, February 22, 2023, <https://time.com/6257372/russia-ukraine-war-disinformation>.

¹⁶ Emilie Hafner-Burton, "Sticks and Stones: Naming and Shaming the Human Rights Enforcement Problem," *International Organization* 62 (Fall 2008), 689.

¹⁷ Pamela Brown, "Iran sent 'multiple messages' to US that its attacks were done," *CNN*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/08/politics/iran-messages-us-response/index.html>.

The United States successfully shaped the narrative about Russia's unsafe actions in March 2023 when it quickly revealed a Su-27 dumped fuel on a United States MQ-9 drone in international airspace. The United States immediately blamed Russia on March 14, 2023, and less than 48 hours later the United States Department of Defense provided video evidence enforcing its narrative that the Su-27 pilots were flying unprofessionally and hit the MQ-9 causing it to crash. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley told reporters, "the intercept was intentional, the aggressive behavior was intentional, and it is very unprofessional and very unsafe."¹⁸ Releasing the video advanced United States national security interests because it provided solid proof of Russia's aggression. By not acknowledging the incident or by not releasing video proof to support its claims, the United States would have ceded the information environment to Russia. Three days later the Russian government awarded medals to the pilots praising them for preventing the violation of a military exclusion zone enacted by Russia. During the ceremony, the Russian Ministry of Defense emphasized the pilots "did not come into contact" with the American drone, a fact already refuted by the United States Department of Defense via video.¹⁹ The fast declassification of this footage laid the framework for the United States to own the information environment despite any propaganda coming out of Moscow.

While the March 2023 drone incident proved successful in quickly shaping the information environment, the United States fumbled the Iran-United States RQ-170 drone incident on December 4, 2011, when Iran's cyber warfare unit brought a down United States

¹⁸ Carla Babb, "US Releases Video of Encounter Between Russian Fighter Jets and US Drone," *Voice of America*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-releases-video-of-encounter-between-russian-fighter-jets-and-us-drone-/7007789.html>.

¹⁹ James Bickerton, "Putin Honors Pilots Who Downed U.S. Drone as 'Heroes'," *Newsweek*, March 17, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-honors-pilots-who-downed-us-drone-heroes-1788589>.

drone. Initially, United States spokespersons claimed that drone operators lost control of the drone, and declined to say what kind of aircraft was missing.²⁰ Four days later, on December 8, 2011, the Department of Defense said that it was still examining the issue. It was not until eight days later, on December 12, 2011, that President Obama acknowledged the drone belonged to the United States and asked for its repatriation. During all this churn, the Iranians went to the United Nations and lodged a formal complaint that the United States drone flew over its sovereign air space. By then, the United States forfeited any opportunity to control the narrative or defend itself. President Obama had to retract his earlier claim that Iran did not shoot down the drone, giving Iran the upper hand in the United States' security relationship in the Middle East.

Unlike the 2011 Iran-United States drone incident, timely releases of credible and truthful information can help to deescalate tensions. In October 2018, PRC-United States tensions increased after the PRC cancelled a Hong Kong port call for the USS Wasp. Following that decision, the United States Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis cancelled a trip to Beijing and the United States Navy released photos of USS Wasp sailors taking part in a live-fire exercise in the South China Sea firing on inflatable targets. Additionally, the United States flew B-52 bombers over the South China Sea and the East China Sea. This resulted in a PRC warship sailing within 45 yards of the United States destroyer, the USS Decatur. Rather than escalate the exchange, the United States immediately released photos to help moderate the expanded tensions with proof of the PRC's aggressive sailing practices.²¹ After the United States released the photos, the PRC did not engage in such aggressive practices for several months. While the practice of Chinese

²⁰ Greg Jaffe and Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Says it Downed U.S. Stealth Drone; Pentagon Acknowledges Aircraft Downing," *Washington Post*, December 4, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-says-it-downed-us-stealth-drone-pentagon-acknowledges-aircraft-downing/2011/12/04/gIQAyxa8TO_story.html.

²¹ Barbara Starr, Ryan Browne and Brad Lendon, "Chinese Warship in 'Unsafe' Encounter with U.S. Destroyer, Amid Rising U.S.-China Tensions," *CNN*, October 1, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/01/politics/china-us-warship-unsafe-encounter/index.html>.

aggressive naval activity continues, it typically tamps down when the United States publicly decries this behavior, which is a part of the United States' deterrence by denial efforts.²²

Declassification & Information Advantage

The immediate declassification of imagery and video provides evidence when an adversary counters an initial attempt to set the narrative, providing the United States the information advantage. As demonstrated by the high-altitude balloon, the Su-27/RQ-9, and the USS Decatur, when the United States provides statements, photos or videos immediately after event it successfully owns the rhetoric surrounding the incident. In these instances, speed is important. Being first to speak and first to respond controls the information environment and prevents any misinformation or disinformation. Compare these victories to the presidential retraction from the 2011 missing drone, by not providing immediate information or by providing inaccurate information, the United States lost the information advantage. On the contrary, the United States – in coordination with its intelligence sharing partners – seized the information advantage ahead of and during the early days of Russia's February 2022 invasion into Ukraine. By quickly declassifying intelligence, imagery, and video, it showed the world Russia's nefarious actions. Greater transparency relates to greater speed in a reaction. It also concretely illustrated the imagery was not matching the narrative coming out of Russia. By drumming up so much public support early on, the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies immediately employed severe economic sanctions.

The saying “a picture is worth 1,000 words” originated in 1911 when the Syracuse Men's Club invited New York Evening Journal editor, Arthur Brisbane, to discuss journalism publicity.

²² “Military Confrontation in the South China Sea,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 21, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/report/military-confrontation-south-china-sea>.

During his lecture he told the men to “use a picture – it’s worth a thousand words.”²³ Studies from an “Advances in Psychiatric Treatment” study demonstrate that imagery sticks in the human brain more effectively and longer than words.²⁴ Photos and videos provide hard evidence compared to disputable rhetoric. In the case of the USS Decatur, once the United States Navy released imagery, all the PRC could say was the United States “sent warships into waters near China’s islands and reefs in South China Sea, which has posed a grave threat to China’s sovereignty and security, severely damaged the relations between the two militaries, and significantly undermined regional peace and stability.”²⁵ It did not deny its aggressive maneuvers in this lengthy statement.

The February 2022 Russian invasion into Ukraine and the near-immediate declassification of imagery and video proved to be a resounding success to call out Russia’s hostile actions. Even before the invasion, the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) quickly declassified information about a Russian plan to spread disinformation about a purported Ukrainian attack on Russian soil in a measure named “one of the most aggressive moves from the intelligence community to reveal the calculation of tricky and diplomatic and national security problems since the Kennedy Administration opened their notebooks about the Cuban Missile Crisis.”²⁶ The tactic was so successful, *Time Magazine* said “the intelligence community wants the world to know that Washington has the receipts in Kyiv, and Moscow should just go home – just like the Kremlin retreated from Havana back when Ray Charles topped the charts in

²³ “A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words,” Cambridge University Press, January 2, 2018, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-psychiatric-treatment/article/picture-is-worth-a-thousand-words>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ben Werner, “China’s Atypical Response to US Navy FONOPS May Be a Message to Trump Administration,” *USNI News*, October 3, 2018.

²⁶ Philip Elliott, “Why the CIA Director Is Declassifying Material on Russia’s Ukraine Plot,” *Time*, February 16, 2022, <https://time.com/6148791/william-burns-cia-russia-declassify>.

1962.”²⁷ The immediate declassification of intelligence, imagery, and videos to expose Russia’s malign behavior was not just a United States effort. The United Kingdom’s commander of Strategic Command, General Sir Jim Hockenhull, lauded the collaboration between the intelligence community and open-source intelligence during a December 2022 Royal United Services Institute webinar. During his speech he applauded the near-immediate declassification of intelligence and the immediate information sharing with the public.²⁸

General Hockenhull’s reference to open-source intelligence (OSINT) does not refer only to social media resources. Non-governmental organizations such as Airwars, Bellingcat and InformNapalm dedicate tremendous resources into tracking allegations of civilian harm and fact checking open-source intelligence (OSINT).²⁹ Both groups provide treasure troves of analysis, information, and imagery based on its investigations. These organizations, through their visible efforts, push for transparency. The North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO), while humorous in nature, contributes to the narrative warfare against Russia while fueling buy-in to the Western systems of ideas and norms. While they are not part of the media, intelligence community or official spokespersons, their OSINT work helps to provide a truthful narrative in a timely manner – displaying to the most important factor to gaining and maintaining the information advantage: speed.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jim Hockenhull, “How Open-source Intelligence has Shaped the Russia-Ukraine War,” RUSI Members Webinar, December 9, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/how-open-source-intelligence-has-shaped-the-russia-ukraine-war>.

²⁹ Robin Kemp, “OSINT’s influence on the Russian air campaign in Ukraine and the implications for future Western deployments,” Atlantic Council, August 30, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/airpower-after-ukraine/osints-influence-on-the-russian-air-campaign-in-ukraine-and-the-implications-for-future-western-deployments>.

Counterargument

Some believe that acknowledging adversary actions or naming and shaming them puts the United States in an unnecessary tit for tat, thereby distracting from achieving national security objectives especially when first reports are wrong. In November 2022, a Ukrainian missile erroneously landed in Poland. Initially the *Associated Press* reported that Russian missiles crossed into Poland and killed two people, forcing the media outlet to issue a correction.³⁰ While the source might have innocently erred, this demonstrates the pressure on the intelligence community to quickly declassify information, which increases the risk of making errors. The same applies to the March 2003 belief that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This breakdown places the Iraq War among *Foreign Policy*'s "Ten Biggest American Intelligence Failures" along with Pearl Harbor and 9/11.³¹

Skeptics believe that when the United States does not immediately call attention to an adversary's actions, the United States is hiding something. When operating as an entity, the unitary state perspective points to a perception the United States is concealing the truth. When Iran accidentally shot down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 on January 8, 2020, only five days after the assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps General Qasem Soleimani, the world spent days speculating what happened. This fog of war, coupled with Iran's resistance to an independent investigation, led many to believe in a cover up. The *Journal of Experimental Political Science* studied conspiracy theories, finding them prevalent among the public. It noted that "governments frequently release official documents attempting to explain events that inspire these beliefs; however, these documents are often heavily redacted, a practice that lay epistemic

³⁰ "Correction: Russia-Ukraine-War story," *Associated Press*, November 16, 2022.

³¹ Uri Friedman, "Ten Biggest American Intelligence Failures," *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/03/the-ten-biggest-american-intelligence-failures>.

theory suggests might be interpreted as evidence for a conspiracy.”³² The brain wants evidence and proof to believe the words it is processing, or it anticipates a lie.

Another argument to slow down the information flow and not rush to promulgate false information is that the public release of information does not deescalate tensions with the PRC or Russia. The better alternative is to privately shame them to extract concessions, or to use backdoor diplomacy channels to address malign behavior. The Cuban Missile Crisis, the Cold War, the Iranian Nuclear Deal, and the defrosted relations between the United States and Cuba were all achieved through backchannel negotiations. Rather than publicly strong-arm Russia, Iran, and Cuba, the United States used quiet diplomatic pressure to achieve success. The United Kingdom even employed back channels to come to an agreement with Ireland. The Indians and Pakistanis used back channels to work out a draft framework agreement on the disputed region of Kashmir in 2007, proving that nations can work through conflict without drawing attention to public disagreements.

While speed is important, it can become a liability when information is wrong, and hinders United States’ credibility. Speed can become a liability when initial intelligence estimates need more time, and pressure to release creates mistakes. Speed can also become a liability because when the United States needs more room to maneuver, but stakeholders assume there is a cover-up. If the United States, however, does not gain and maintain the information advantage, its adversaries will fill that vacuum and OSINT analysts will arrive at conclusions based on what fills the void. To continue to gain and maintain the information advantage, the United States needs to reveal information when it can and continue its new practices of rapid declassification. This will help to build global consensus across its robust alliance networks.

³² Brendan Nyan, et al. “Classified or Coverup? The Effect of Redactions on Conspiracy Theory Beliefs,” *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, Volume 3 , Issue 2 (Winter 2016), 109.

Conclusion

Silence allows the adversary to fill the information environment. The United States should prioritize the information instrument of national power, and the speed in which it releases information to shape the information environment to align with national security objectives. Immediate dissemination of statements, imagery and video helps the United States to gain and maintain the information advantage, most notably to own the narrative in strategic competition. It is more important to label each adversary's aggressive act towards the United States and attempt to follow up with tangible evidence than to adopt a passive stance with respect to adversary actions. While speed or the availability of imagery or video are issues, the goal should always be to label aggressive behavior immediately, or the adversary will own the narrative. If the United States is hesitant with its adversaries in the information environment for fear of escalation, the United States government will cause the situation to escalate rather than halting tensions on the road to potential conflict.